

Slaying Dragons

By Angela Phillips

Improper Passcode -- Access Denied...

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"A plume of smoke from the end of the canyon heralded the approach of the dragon. Veni drew closer to his elder sister as Vici activated her lightsaber."

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"Veni trembled at the sound of 20 powerful reptilian legs plunging toward him in deadly synchronization. But Vici was not afraid. Though only 16 years old, she held the mighty power of the Force tightly in her hands. The dragon drew closer."

Vweep! Access Granted...

Shannon Voorson set her story platform aside and turned back to the monitor. "Finally," she muttered. This code had taken longer to slice than usual. Still, she reflected, any code one computer can generate, another can imitate. First Law of Slicing. Now, she thought, let's see if we've found anything interesting...

"Oh, yuck," she sighed when she saw the contents of the file she'd entered: a register of six new Star Destroyers nearing completion at the nearby Kuat Drive Yards. What stupid names they have, she thought -- the *Impervious*, the *Penetrator*, the *Inflexible*, the *Indomitable*, the *Inexorable*, and the *Exterminator*. If I were naming Star Destroyers, she thought, I'd give them names like the *Iron Hand*, the *Raptor*, or the *Titania*. Still, what do you expect from people with so little imagination they let computers come up with their access codes?

Shannon heard voices through the thin pre-fab walls of her room; someone had entered the apartment, and her parents were greeting the visitor. Deciding to investigate, she saved the Star Destroyer files under the password "dumbnames" and shut down her computer's code program.

The Voorson family had been techs at Kuat Freight Port for generations. Most of them had spent their entire lives aboard the station -- they were born in the company Wellness Center, educated in the company school, apprenticed to and then hired by Kuat Port Support Services. They married co-workers, raised their families in company housing, and rarely left the station, even to go so far as the planet Kuat itself. There was no reason to leave -- the company stores on the station provided everything they needed, the pay and benefits for KFP workers were among the best in the system, and they had the pride and satisfaction of knowing that, as members of the Kuat Engineering conglomerate, they were helping build the finest starships in the galaxy. Still, every so often a Voorson would look beyond the comfortable walls of a station apartment to see what the rest of the thousand-thousand worlds had to offer. Shannon's cousin, Deen, was one of these wandering Voorsons.

"Deen!" she squealed excitedly at the sight of the young man embracing her father. "Oh, Deen, it's you! You're finally here! Where have you been? What have you been doing?" Shannon leapt at the guest.

Her cousin turned to catch her. "Hey, Little Bit, I've missed you! Oof!" He grunted as he tried to lift her off the floor. "You've grown, Little Bit -- let me look at you! You're so tall now, and your hair is so long -- when I left, you were a baby, with braids only to your ears, and Aunt Nell had you sleep with a scarf on to keep them from standing straight up in the morning!"

Nell Voorson nodded, and smiled wryly. "Now I have to keep her from chewing the ends."

"Oh, Deen," said Shannon, "I've missed you so -- come and see my room! It's all different now, and I have my own computer and everything!" She tugged on his hand.

Deen smiled indulgently at the child. "I've missed you, too, Little Bit, but don't you think your parents want to talk to me too?" "Oh, go with her, Deen," said Nell. "You can talk while Johan and I get supper on."

* * *

"I can't believe you're really here," said Shannon, hopping up and down in the center of her room. "It's been four whole years! What have you been doing?"

"Slaying dragons."

Shannon laughed. "No, Deen, really!"

"Really! Well, sort of. Helping to slay artificial dragons -- I've been working as a tech." He took a seat next to Shannon's computer.

"Where?"

"Oh, different places," he said. His dark eyes wandered over the room. "Are you still reading those old stories grandmother gave you?" he asked as he spotted the story platform on her computer.

"Yep," said Shannon, "even though Mother says I should outgrow them, like dolls."

"I don't see many dolls here," said Deen.

"Yep. I like computers now. I'm a slicer. I can slice into anything."

"Anything?" Deen asked, chuckling.

"Anything. So who do you work for? What kind of work do you do? Do you get paid a lot? Do you fix droids, or ships, or what?"

"Hey," said Deen, "one question at a time! I work for some friends I made, right after I left here. They're good friends. I don't get paid a lot, but I like what I'm doing. Mostly I work on ships..."

"What kind?"

"Small starcraft, mostly, but some larger ones, and anything else that my friends need fixed. I have to be flexible."

"What's the hardest thing you've ever had to fix?"

Deen paused. "Well," he said, glancing at the closed bedroom door, "a few months ago, I had to adapt some airspeeders to operate at 20 degrees below freezing..."

"And did they work?"

"Well enough... That's *Vici of Alderaan*, isn't it?" he asked, pointing to the story platform on the computer.

"Yup, it's still my favorite. Vici is so brave."

"One who has the Force need have no fear," Deen murmured. "That's what Vici's grandfather tells her."

"Say," Shannon asked, "did you get a chance to visit Alderaan? Before..."

Deen shook his head. "No. I never did. I wish I could have. But I never had the chance."

"It's not fair," said Shannon, settling on the floor.

"That I never got to Alderaan?" asked her cousin.

"That they blew it up. Stupid Empire. Why'd they do it? Grandmother always said Alderaan was a planet of peace and beauty. There weren't any weapons there. Why'd they do it?"

"Because of that," said Deen, pointing.

"Because of my story platform?"

"Because of that story," said Deen. "That story, and others like it. The stories of Alderaan were more dangerous to the Emperor than any weapon."

"How can a story be more dangerous than a weapon?" asked Shannon.

"Because of the ideas in it. On Alderaan, people still believed in the Force. On Alderaan, people remembered the Jedi Knights and the Old Republic. The people of Alderaan remembered the way things were in the galaxy before the coming of the Empire, before the days of hate and fear. And their stories, libraries and universities held all of the ideas that can destroy the Emperor -- that love is stronger than hate, that people are stronger than weapons, that combined together the people in this galaxy have a strength the Emperor can never oppose." Deen's eyes were shining.

"So the Emperor," said Shannon, "destroyed Alderaan to destroy all these ideas?"

"He tried," said Deen, "but he didn't succeed. He can never succeed. The only way for him to control all the ideas in the galaxy would be for him to kill or enslave everyone in the galaxy, and that's impossible. He can't win. The more crimes he commits, the more people will stand up to fight him..."

"Deen," asked Shannon, "are you a Rebel?"

Deen put a hand to his mouth.

"It's all right," Shannon added, "I won't tell anybody. Not even Mom and Dad. Here," she said, switching to the computer, "look what I found today. Just before you got here. I'll give you a copy if you want..."

"How did you access this?" Deen asked, staring at the list of Star Destroyers. "Do you have any idea... "

"It's easy to slice into Imperial files; they have computer-rigged pass-names. I make up my own codes myself. Usually animal names, like `nerf,' or `bhillen,' or even `dog.' "

"I can't believe this," Deen said, still reading the datascreen. "Do you know what this is worth -- do you know what will happen to you if someone catches you at this?"

"No one's ever gotten past my codes," said Shannon proudly.

"Maybe no one's ever considered investigating the files of a nine-year old girl," said Deen. "You've got to stop this -- you'll get yourself killed!"

Shannon bit her lip. "Does that mean you don't want copies of the files?"

Mistress Voorson called them to dinner, cutting off Deen's answer.

* * *

Gathered around a pot of stewed bhillen, the family discussed the last four years: Shannon's schooling, Nell's promotion to senior docking supervisor of Kuat Freight Port, Johan and Deen's work as techs. Johan complained about impatient starship captains expecting miracles. Deen told horror stories of combatting heat, cold, humidity, dust, ice, offensive flora, fauna, microbes, and every other threat to machinery on backwater worlds he neglected to name.

"You actually found moss growing in the ships' coolant coils?" asked Johan.

"Yep," said Deen. "Two hours before launch."

"Did you get 'em cleaned up in time?"

Deen grinned. "Skin of our teeth."

"The Force was with you," his uncle said.

Nell frowned slightly. "It's good to have you home, Deen, after so long. I was beginning to think you'd left us for good. And now," she said, "here you are. Are you in trouble Deen? Do you need anything?"

"Nell," her husband protested, "can't a boy fly in without an ulterior motive?"

Deen stared at his plate. "Actually," he said, poking his custard with a spoon, "I was wondering..."

"Ah, here it comes," said Nell.

"My friends," Deen continued, "the ones I work with... They've had some problems lately, lost a lot of equipment..."

"Lost?" asked Nell.

"Uh, yeah, damaged. Beyond repair."

"How?" asked Johan.

"Well ... there were a lot of asteroids, and -- it's a long story, but the point is, we need a Colony Class 23669 power generator, and..."

"Why don't you contact the factory, then?" asked Nell. "If you put your order in now, you could have the generator in six months or less, barring rush orders from Imperial Procurement."

"We need it sooner than that, and we've heard a generator's being shipped out of here to an Imperial outpost within two weeks."

"I don't see what that has to do with you," said Johan.

"Well, see, Aunt Nell, you control the docking stations, and we figured if we could arrange docking clearance, you could slip in our barge driver in place of the Imperials'..." "

"I cannot believe," Nell said, "that you are sitting at my dining table talking about hijacking 25 million credits worth of power generator as if you were asking to borrow a speeder."

"But Aunt Nell..." "

"You're talking about stealing that generator, aren't you?"

"But... we could pay you..." "

Nell's mouth fell open. Johan found his voice. "Deen, do you hear what you're saying? This isn't just another prank, like the time you sliced into the school comm-system with phony evacuation drills..." "

"This is treason," Nell finished. "Deen, I don't want to hear another word about these so-called friends of yours. Now, because you're my nephew, I'm not going to turn you in and we're all going to pretend this conversation never happened. Is that perfectly clear?"

The meal ended in silence.

* * *

Shannon couldn't sleep that night. Hearing voices from her parents' room, she crept to their door to listen.

"The Alliance is desperate for equipment, Nell!"

"Do you think I care? Johan, that Alliance will never feed my family or give Shannon an education that'll get her off this station!"

"But the Empire ..."

"... Owns this system, and everything in it. Including us. And they have ways of disposing of traitors. Accidents. Johan, do you honestly believe it was a coincidence your brother died in that reactor malfunction less than a week after he'd repaired those Rebels' ship? Nothing is worth the safety of my family, Johan, nothing. Not the Alliance, not Alderaan ..."

"Not even Deen?"

Shannon didn't stay to hear her mother's answer.

* * *

Deen left the next morning after a tense, silent breakfast. "If you change your minds," he began.

"We won't," his aunt said. "Now drop the subject."

"But if you do," Deen persisted, "I'll be in-system for a few days. Here's a signaller you can use to contact me," he said, dropping the hand-held electronic device on a table near the door. "May the Force be with you."

"Destroy that signaller," said Nell after the door had closed.

"I'll do it, Mom," said Shannon, snatching up the device and darting to the reclamator. The appliance disposed of the morning's trash with a satisfying "crunch" -- but the signaller remained hidden in Shannon's pocket.

* * *

The elder Voorsons behaved as if Deen had never come; if Shannon mentioned his "friends" or his request for aid, she was sent to her room without discussion.

"I can't understand it!" she said to herself on one such occasion. It's not as if the station doesn't mix stuff up all the time, she thought. Mother's always complaining about this-or-that going missing. Bugs in the station net -- that's what she always says. If she gave Deen that generator, everyone would just think it was another computer mistake...

Rolling out of her bed, Shannon flipped on her computer. A few minutes and slices later, she had the list of upcoming exports scrolling across her screen. There it is, she thought, a CC-23669 generator, to be picked up at loading dock 42, at 1430 hours, five days from now. All right, she thought, if I change the pick-up date, Mother will surely notice and stop us. Can't change the dock number either, that would make a huge fuss. But if I changed the time... How long does it take to link a driver to a barge? Daddy says he can do it in less than an hour -- would two hours be enough?

She changed the pick-up time to 1230 and hoped her mother wouldn't notice. Then she pulled Deen's signaller from under her pillow.

* * *

"Who are you?" asked the security guard. Shannon gulped and tried to look cute and harmless. "Shannon Voorson, ma'am," she said.

"Oh, Shannon," the woman said, recognizing the child, "why aren't you at school yet? What're you doing here?"

Shannon knew that "I'm running away to join the Rebellion," would not be a popular answer to that question. Fortunately, she had come prepared with a lie.

"My daddy forgot his lunch, so's I'm bringing it to him before I go. A bhillen sandwich -- see?" She set her portable computer down and opened the thermabag to thrust it into the guard's face so that she was sure to catch the aroma of Bestinnian tangroot.

"Oh, ah, yeah, sure," said the guard, pulling back and blinking. "Go find your Daddy. I'm sure he'll love it."

"Thanks," said Shannon. She bolted off, thinking that raw tangroot was pretty stinky, but there was no way that guard was going to dig past it and find Deen's signaller.

She continued down the corridor toward her father's work area for a few more steps, ducked into an alcove, peeked out to see that the guard was gone, and then doubled back toward dock 42.

The techs hadn't arrived at the dock yet that morning, so Shannon had no trouble slicing her way into the cargo container with a few connecting cables from her portable computer. After a surprisingly long crawl over, under, and around the generator to the front of the container, she settled down with her book-chips to wait for Deen.

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"You sure this'll work, Deen?" said Boo Rawl, captain of the Rebel barge driver *Long Run*.

"For the thousandth time Boo, yes! My aunt is the docking supervisor at this port. She wouldn't have signalled for us to come if she didn't have everything at this end arranged. I didn't live through the evacuation of Echo Base just to get blown out of the sky by my own family."

"I'm not nearly as worried about your family as I am about what you've done to my sublight engines," said Boo.

"I didn't do a thing to your precious engines, Boo," said Deen, "all I did was add an ST box so the port will read our transponder signal as the Imperial driver's. Standard Operating Procedure, straight out of Cracken's Field Guide -- I do it all the time."

"Yeah, well, you seemed to be getting pretty close to my cobulators with that hydrosponder..."

"Oh, quit griping and hail the port -- we're practically on top of them."

Boo Rawl shrugged and opened a channel. "Kuat Freight Port, this is Drive Craft 36DD, requesting permission to link with the barge in..." Boo paused to check a datapad. "Loading dock 42."

"Drive craft, your transponder signal is unclear," said a cold voice from the station, "Please transmit clearance code to confirm your identity."

Boo gave Deen a pointed stare as he sent out the code. "Uh, sorry about the transponder, Kuat," he said, "new tech on board was tweaking the sublights, obviously got a little carried away."

"Identity confirmed," answered the controller, uninterested in Boo's explanations. "Driver *DeeDee*, you are early. Link techs will be at dock 42 at 1430."

Boo turned again to Deen, who gestured innocence but said nothing.

"Ah, are you sure about that, Kuat?" asked Boo. "My orders say pickup at 1230."

"I will check, *DeeDee*," said the controller.

Boo shut off the comm. "Isn't that one of your aunt's people?"

Deen nodded.

"Then what's the problem?"

"I dunno... "

Kuat hailed the driver: "It seems you are right, driver *DeeDee*," said the controller. "You are listed for 1230... "

Deen smirked at Boo.

"However, there will be a slight delay -- the techs' orders say 1430. They will be back on duty within the hour."

"No problem Kuat, I'll wait," said Boo. He shut down the comm again. "Now what?" he asked Deen.

"We wait for the techs to finish lunch, like you said."

Boo rolled his eyes. "What if Security decides to visit us while we're waiting?"

"Boo, you worry as much as my friend Voren," said Deen. "Security'll be on break too."

"Yeah, off playing Whack-a-Bothan, or Bobbing for Calamari." Boo sighed. "I hate waiting," he said.

* * *

"Finally! I thought they'd take forever!" said Boo as they received the signal that the last of the linking clamps had secured the cargo container to the barge driver. "Kuat, this is driver *DeeDee*," he said, cutting off the latest scarlet-rated offering of Billi B and the Paradise Gang and hailing the station. "I've linked up to the barge here, and I'd like to check the cargo before I leave."

"Go ahead, *DeeDee*."

"All right, Deen," Boo said as he cut the comm. "She's all ours. Let's take a quick peek and vanish before the real barge driver *DeeDee* shows up."

Deen entered the airlock connecting the access hatch on the cargo container.

"Is the generator all right?" asked Boo as Deen entered the hold. "The generator is huge -- you don't really want me to spend two days inspecting... Wait a... "

"What?"

"I saw something move... "

"Hi, Deen!" said Shannon, popping into view. "Is this the generator you wanted?"

"Shannon!"

"Who's the kid?" Boo asked.

"My cousin... Shannon, does your mother know you're in here?"

"Of course not. We'd better get moving."

"We?" said Deen. "What do you mean, we?"

"I'm joining the Rebellion," she answered, hauling out her portable computer. "Now come on, we've got to go."

"Absolutely not," said Deen. "You are going straight back home."

"How?" said Boo. "The dock's been depressurized, and I'm not too thrilled with the idea of calling the techs back, having them unlink us and re-pressurize the dock, explaining the kid to security, and then waiting to get linked up again. I'm not crazy about dragging some poor kid into danger, but we have no choice. She's on for the haul."

"He's right," said Shannon, climbing into the driver cab. "Close those hatches and let's go!"

"But..." Deen began.

"The Imperial driver will be here in... less than 30 minutes," said Shannon, checking her chrono.

"Set our coordinates for hyperspace, comrade," she told Boo.

"Name's Boo. Now keep quiet, kid, I gotta talk to your mom's folks."

Shannon nodded. Deen stood in shock.

"Kuat, this is barge driver *DeeDee*. My cargo is secure and I'm ready to go."

"Affirmative, Driver *DeeDee*," said the controller. "You may leave port when ready; thank you for choosing Kuat Engineering, and please be careful of repair drones on your way out."

"No problem, Kuat," said Boo, "and thanks for everything." He began piloting the barge away from the dock. "This is almost too easy," he said. "Deen, your aunt is the best..."

"What did she have to do with it?" asked Shannon. "I set the whole thing up!"

"What do you mean, you set it up?" asked Deen.

"Mom was too scared to help you -- you knew that, Deen," Shannon said. "So I changed the pickup time."

"And Aunt Nell..."

"Doesn't know a thing."

Boo was astonished. "The kid set this up? I'm impressed. Great cousin you got here, Deen. Though it would've been nice if she'd gotten the techs here sooner."

"Sorry, Boo, I, uh, sort of forgot to change their orders," said Shannon. "How long 'till we can jump?"

"We've just cleared tractor beam range -- let me get past that one drive craft ... Aw, no, I don't believe it!"

"What?" asked Shannon.

"See ahead? That's the real barge driver *36DD*, come to pick up the generator."

"You sure?" asked Deen.

The comm light flashed. "Unknown Driver," said the controller, "return to dock immediately."

The three Rebels looked at each other. "Keep going," said Deen.

"Repeat," said the controller, "Unknown Driver, return your barge to dock and you will not be harmed."

"Yeah, right," muttered Boo.

The Imperial drive craft positioned itself between the Rebels and the spacelane.

"Get around it!" said Shannon.

"How?" said Boo. "The *Long Run* ain't no snubfighter -- linked to a loaded barge, it moves like a drunken Hutt."

"What's its shield tolerance like?" asked Deen, pointing out the viewport, where at least a dozen TIE fighters were converging on them.

"Oh, beautiful." Said Boo, "I knew this was too easy."

The comm light blinked again. "Unidentified Driver," said a familiar female voice, "this is Senior Controller Voorson with your final warning. Reverse your heading and return to dock 42, or our security forces will open fire."

"Lovely," Boo muttered. "Deen, take the guns. Blast anything between us and freedom."

"Wait," said Deen, "I have an idea -- Shannon, follow my lead," he said, slapping the comm panel.

"Controller Voorson," he said, "call off your attack! We have your daughter." He nudged Shannon.

"Mom, Mom, it's me! Don't shoot!" she said.

The comm panel was silent.

"You think that'll stop 'em?" Shannon asked.

Laser blasts bounced off the driver's shields.

"There's your answer," said Boo. "Take the guns, Deen!"

Deen hit the firing buttons. The small turbolasers managed to hit two oncoming TIEs, and three more were disabled by flying debris. Deen kept firing.

"Rebel Driver," said Nell Voorson, her voice touched with panic, "turn back now. Security will not permit you to escape!"

"We ain't askin' for permission!" shouted Boo, continuing to plow forward. A TIE's solar panel clipped their shields; the TIE flew apart, colliding with one of its fellows.

"Boo, the shields are gonna go any second," said Deen, still blasting at their attackers.

"Rebel barge driver," said Nell Voorson, "this is pointless. Stop now or be destroyed..."

"Sorry, Auntie, there's no going back now!" said Boo.

"Rebel... Deen!" Nell pleaded. "Deen, think of what you're doing -- think of Shannon -- Security won't listen to me!" she shouted, "they won't let you go!"

"I'm sorry Aunt Nell," Deen began.

"Watch the TIEs!" Boo warned; the stream of tiny fighters continued to pour at them.

"We're gonna hit that driver!" Shannon cried as the Imperial barge *36DD* loomed before them.

"Not if they're smarter than we are," said Boo.

Deen bit his lip and Shannon covered her eyes as the drivers converged. Nell Voorson's voice continued to beg for sanity over the comm panel. A bead of sweat rolled down Boo's face. "I don't think they're gonna..."

At the last moment, the Imperial driver ducked beneath the *Long Run*. Their shields brushed, buckled, and collapsed as they zoomed past the other ship and into clear space. Four laser bolts from four different TIEs burst past the *Long Run* just as Boo pulled the jump levers; all three Rebels held their breath as the starlines merged into the blur of hyperspace.

"Are we safe now, Boo, are we safe?" asked Shannon.

"Depends on two things," said Boo. "First, whether or not your mother called ahead to Venir or Renegg for Interdictors..."

"And whether or not we hit somebody," Deen finished. Shannon crept into her cousin's lap and laid her head on his shoulder. All three Rebels remained tense, silent, waiting for either a fatal crash or a jerk out of hyperspace into Imperial custody.

The minutes dragged on. Shannon realized that, whether she lived or died, she would never see her parents again; she began to cry. Deen held her close, wiping her tears and rocking her. "Hey," said Boo softly, "it's been 30 minutes. We're clear."

"We're away?" said Shannon.

Boo nodded. "Free and clear, kid -- welcome to the Alliance."

"Little Bit," said Deen, "I'm sorry I got you into this..."

"I'm not," said Shannon, putting on a smile. "Come on, now, Deen -- let's go slay some dragons."